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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of courses and instructors. The subjects were 810 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in education and psychology courses. A Feelings About Course test, consisting of a 50 item true-false instrument, was administered. Independent variables were the classification of the students, class size, grade point average, college enrolled in, sex of the student, sex and age of the instructor, and the years of instructors' experience. Grade point average, class size, and the sex of the respondent emerged as significant variables. Of these, class size appeared to have the strongest impact on students' perceptions of courses and instructors. (JD)

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Student Affect in the University Classroom

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that the relationship which exists between a student and teacher significantly influences the learning process. However, it is less clear as to what specific relationship dimensions effect an individual's learning process. The purpose of this study was to investigate the students' perceptions of the course and instructor. Subjects for the study consisted of 810 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in education and psychology courses. The Feelings About Course was administered to the students and then examined by means of a one-way analysis of variance. The results indicated significant differences at the .05 level of confidence when examined by grade point average, class size, and sex of the student.

The differences found in the study suggest that students with high grade point averages view courses with a more positive attitude than do students with low grade point averages. The data also reveal that female students perceive courses in a more favorable manner than males. Finally, the results show that there is a class size which is preferred by students.

The most interesting finding was the apparent differences of students' perceptions of the course based on class size.

Student Affect in the University Classroom

Educators have long been interested in attempting to understand and define the dynamics of the classroom (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974; McCullough & Roy, 1975; Parent, Forward, Canten & Mohling, 1975; Reynolds & Gentile, 1976; Thurber & Friedli, 1976). Specifically, what are the factors that contribute to the atmosphere of the classroom?

A number of variables have been studied. Elmore and LaPointi (1975) investigated the influence of the sex of the student on rating of teacher effectiveness. They concluded that female students rated female teachers higher than they did male teachers. The same relationship existed for male students and male teachers. In another study, Haslett (1976) found that female students rated rapport as an essential element of a good teacher. McKeachie, Lin, and Mann (1971) also noted that female students perceive relational dimensions as an important part of the classroom.

Significant differences can also be found when studying those students with a high grade point average (GPA) and those with a low GPA. Sachdwa (1976) found that those students with high GPA's view the learning environment from a different perspective than their less successful classmates. High achievers want a well-organized, enthusiastic, and concise presentation leading to independent thinking. On the other hand, low achievers are more concerned with fair evaluation, and the organization and presentation of

the course.

Elmore and Pohlman (1978) also noted that students with higher GPA's rate course quality, examinations, and textbooks higher.

In a study of psychology classes, Gilmore, Swerdlik, and Buhr (1980) concluded that class size is an influence on how students perceive the course. Middle range classes had the best ratings in this study. Elmore and Pohlman (1978) found that small class size was an important factor in student reactions to the course.

Method

Procedure

Data from the Feelings About Course instrument were collected from 810 graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in psychology and education classes at a medium size public university in the south. The data were computer scored and examined by means of a one-way analysis of variance with significant differences among groups being determined by t-tests. The independent variables consisted of the classification of the students, class size , grade point average, college enrolled in, sex of the student, sex and age of the instructor, and the years of instructors' teaching experience.

Instrument Used

The instrument used in the study was the Feelings About Course (FAC). The FAC is a 50 item true-false instrument

designed to measure the students' perceptions about the course and instructor. The FAC is a revision by the authors of the Feelings About School (Bills, 1975) which has been widely used as a measure of students' affect of their school. The FAC has been judged to have content validity. The point biserial correlation of the FAC is .30 and has a corrected split half coefficient of .92.

Results

Of the eight independent variables examined in this study, three were significant at the .05 level of confidence. Grade point average, class size, and the sex of the student were all statistically significant variables when examining students perceptions of a course and instructor.

The data analysis showed a significant differences ($p<.05$) between students with grade point averages of 1.00 to 1.99 and students with grade point averages of 3.0 to 4.0. Students with higher grade point averages scored higher on the FAC.

Class sizes with the number of students between 46-60 scored significantly lower ($p < .05$) on their feelings toward the course when compared with all the other class sizes, while class sizes of 31-45 students showed significantly better scores when compared to class sizes of 61-75, 21-30, and 11-20 students.

A level of confidence of .001 was obtained when the scores of male and female students were analyzed with females scoring significantly higher than males.

Insert Table 1 about here

Discussion

The findings of the study support the hypothesis. Significant differences were found in the way students perceive the classroom environment.

As expected significant differences existed between students of overall grade point averages of 1.0-1.99 and students with grade point averages of 3.0-4.0. Although the literature supports the results, it is important to question which came first-not doing well in school, thus poor perceptions of courses or poor perceptions of courses, thus not doing well in school.

Another difference found in the study was that females perceive the college classroom in a more positive way. One possible explanation for this might be that the female education and psychology students in the sample did not view their coursework as essential for later life, and therefore, did not feel pressure to succeed as much as the males. This could allow those female students to enjoy the course instead of having "to get through." These female students might be considered more traditional when compared to business or engineering female students.

The most important finding of this study concerns the difference of class size and perceptions of the course.

There is a clear indication that an optimum class size exists when talking about students' affect. The findings consistently show classes of 31-45 students scoring significantly higher than almost all other class sizes, including those classes with fewer than 31 students, as well as classes with more than 45 students. The other consistent finding was the relatively negative attitude of those students in classes of 46-60. Several explanations for this are plausible.

Classes of 31-45 students may provide students who desire to become active participants a chance to do so. At the same time these classes may also allow students who prefer to "hide" the opportunity. Classes smaller than 31 students allow for too much visibility for those students who do not want it, and it is very difficult or impossible for students to actively participate in classes of more than 45 students.

The students in class sizes of 46-60 scored significantly lower than all other class sizes examined. For those students wishing to participate, the size of this class is frustrating. Students may not accept the lack of exchange in this size class, but are resigned to it in larger classes, thus the difference in acceptance. The class size of 46-60 also restricts the instructor to a more teacher-centered mode of instruction even though he or she may prefer a more interactive or student-centered approach.

The results of this study spurs further questions. Does one perceive the classroom more positively if he or she has a high grade point average or does the high grade point average perpetuate a positive attitude about courses? Why do females feel better about their courses than males do? Will class size results be duplicated?

The initial phase of this investigation also reveals a need to examine the same variables used in this study with students in other colleges at the university. Would one expect the same results from business, engineering, or science majors, or does affect in the classroom have a greater impact for those students in education and psychology?

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Table 1

Analysis of Variance of Significant Variables

on Feelings About Course

Variables	F	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	N
G. P. A.	2.90*			
0- .99		39.2	7.9	14
1.0-1.99		33.9	12.6	103
2.0-2.99		36.7	12.1	328
3.0-4.0		37.8	12.5	351
Class Size	11.92**			
1-10		38.3	8.3	53
11-20		37.1	12.2	144
21-20		36.8	11.1	121
31-45		40.8	9.7	250
46-60		29.6	17.1	103
61-75		35.0	11.1	114
Student Sex	6.72**			
Males		35.2	13.5	235
Females		37.7	11.7	560

*p<.05
**p<.01